

significant elements of the Soviet scheme of societal development together with the Marxist-Leninist explanation of capitalism and imperialism. They did not hesitate to call the traditional institutions of China, India and the Near East "feudal." They equated post-Mongol Russia and Western feudalism. And they were convinced that Communist Russia—and recently also mainland China—had attained a higher socialist or protosocialist level of development, because they had prevailed over both "feudalism" and capitalism.

5. THE NEED FOR A REEXAMINATION OF MARX',
ENGELS', AND LENIN'S VIEWS ON THE "ASIATIC
SYSTEM" AND ORIENTAL DESPOTISM

THIS being so, no responsible student of hydraulic society will deny the importance of reviewing the ideas of Marx, Engels, and Lenin about the "Asiatic system," Oriental despotism, and societal development. Manifestly such an examination is necessary from the standpoint of our subject matter. And it is highly dramatic, because Marx and Engels, and even the pre-October Lenin, accepted the very Asiatic concept that the high priests of Marxist-Leninist ideology are rejecting today.

B. MARX, ENGELS, AND LENIN ACCEPT THE
ASIATIC CONCEPT

1. MARX FOLLOWS HIS CLASSICAL PREDECESSORS WITH
REGARD TO THE INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE AND THE
DEVELOPMENTAL POSITION OF THE ORIENT^a

MARX' concept of Asiatic society was built largely on the views of such classical economists as Richard Jones and John Stuart Mill, who in their turn had developed generalized ideas held by Adam Smith and James Mill. Adam Smith noted similarities of hydraulic enterprise in China and "several other governments of Asia"; and he commented particularly on the acquisitive power of the rulers in China, ancient Egypt, and India.¹ James Mill considered the "Asiatic model of government" a general institutional type;² and he rejected forced analogies to European feudalism.³ Richard Jones outlined

a. Marxist writers have seldom troubled to trace the sources of Marx' Asiatic concept (see Kautsky's note to Plechanoff, 1891: 447; Kautsky, 1929, II: 209 ff.; and Plekhanov, FPM: 40, 50). In my earlier writings I pointed to the geographer Ritter and to Hegel as possibly having influenced Marx (Wittfogel, 1929: 492-496; *ibid.*, 1931a: 354); but I did not then realize the fundamental dependence of Marx on the classical economists.

4. STALIN

LIKE the first Roman emperor, Augustus, the founding father of the Soviet Union, Lenin, upheld in words what he destroyed by deeds. But words, too, have their history, and under a regime that fits its ideas into a rigid frame, words of the official doctrine makers are not easily cast out. It is no accident that in the USSR arguments defending the concept of an Asiatic society continued to be made openly as long as "subjective socialists" (members of the "Old Guard") openly fought the rise of the new totalitarian bureaucracy. And it is no accident that Stalin, who inherited and developed Lenin's incipient apparatus state, also inherited and developed Lenin's readiness to destroy inconvenient truths, even when these truths were uttered by Marx and Engels—or by Lenin himself.

a. *The Old Guard Objects*

IN 1925 Ryazanov, who was then director of the Marx-Engels Institute, published an article, "Marx on India and China," which brought together Marx' ideas on Asiatic society and the Asiatic mode of production.¹⁰⁹ In the same year the top economist, Varga, declared that government-controlled productive and protective water works were the basis of Chinese society and that the scholarly administrators, the *literati*, and not the representatives of private property, such as the landowners, constituted China's ruling class.¹¹⁰ In 1928 the *Program of the Communist International*, which was drafted under Bukharin's guidance, found in the economy of colonial and semi-colonial countries "feudal medieval relationships, or 'Asiatic mode of production' relationships prevailing"; and Varga, in an article in *Bolshevik*, the theoretical organ of the Communist Party of the USSR, again defined traditional China as an Asiatic society and pointed out that in this society the peasants, both owners and tenants, occupied a very different position from that of the serfs in feudal society.¹¹¹ In 1930 he publicly criticized the Comintern official Yolk and those editors of the *Problemy Kitaia* who sided with him for calling the Asiatic mode of production an Asiatic variant of the feudal mode of production: If Marx had been of this opinion, "he would have said so."¹¹² The change suggested by Yolk involved no less than a "revision of Marxism." Varga therefore demanded that the underlying problem be made the topic of an organized discussion.

Such a discussion was indeed held in Leningrad in February 1931—that is, shortly after the enforced collectivization which enormously strengthened the new Stalin-led *apparatchiki* but before the Purges,